

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Worthington, Matt (2010) "Under Skin: A Monologue about Division in the Body," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss1/13>

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Under Skin: A Monologue about Division in the Body

MATT WORTHINGTON

“THE PROBLEM WITH THE IRISH”

It was during a coffee break at the “Toolbox” conference in London this past summer (sponsored by the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity) that William and I were talking. For purposes of context, it wasn’t really a coffee break because we were in England, and what most people drink during their coffee break is either tea or some sort of black currant juice. Either way, it’s good stuff.

So William (a priest from Northern Ireland) and I are sitting during this coffee break, and he’s going on and on about how the Irish and the Americans are so similar. I immediately feel this connection with him, since some of the English folk that I’m socializing with aren’t nearly as warm. Then the conversation takes a different turn because William starts confiding in me about how the Irish and the English just don’t get along so well and that during our conference’s previous session, the English guy who was talking just about bored him to death. William is going on to tell me about how the English are just so didactic with the Irish and how when he invited an English pastor to speak at an Irish youth conference, no one really paid any attention. However, William affirms the connection between American spirituality and Irish spirituality by explaining that the next year, he invited an American to speak at the Irish youth conference and everyone was absolutely stunned at the American’s message and enthusiasm.

Right off of the bat, I am aware that there is a considerable amount of hegemony that may be in play here, simply because I’m American and William likes that. So I just listen, which is really what he’s after. As he’s talking, I remember Ireland’s painful history with the English. Also, how the Irish were a completely different culture until the English moved in. Immediately, my own visits to the Republic of Ireland (which is considerably more resentful towards the English) come to mind—pubs everywhere that proudly displayed the photographs of men, both young and old, who rallied together to fight for the cause of Irish preservation. I remember that when I visited Dingle, the locals were quick to remind me that this was the only place in all of Ireland where they never stopped speaking Irish (when I asked, “You mean Gaelic?” I was firmly reprimanded for my ignorance). What I learned from this conversation with William is that the cultural and ethnic tension between Ireland and England is still boiling.

Fast forward three hours, and conference participants have been assigned to read texts about various cultures and make specific analyses based on the tools we’ve been given during the lectures earlier that day. Our group is assigned the War on Terror. Our group is comprised of a man and a woman who are both properly English, an Asian girl whose family moved to England when she was a child, two Americans and an Irishman. Up to this point, the English gentleman, who is an Anglican priest, hasn’t really let me say anything, seemingly writing me off because I’m the youngest in the group. Well, when the group starts the discussion, the Asian-English girl suggests that maybe we should allow the Americans to speak first since this culture comes predominantly from the United States. The two English folk seemingly ignore the suggestion and begin a dialogue based on their own opinions about the War on Terror culture. The English

priest begins comparing this culture to the tension that exists between the Irish and the English, saying, “Well, it’s like the problem with the Irish . . .” At this moment, my back awkwardly straightens and I become uncomfortably aware that our English priest had just made a completely insensitive and offensive statement that was bound to awaken rage in the Irishman. William rose out of his chair and reprimanded the English priest, “What do you mean, ‘the problem with the Irish’?” And the English priest quickly brushed it off with a, “Well, you know what I mean . . .” Not being one to interrupt a Christian conference, my friend William let his anger diffuse and pocketed the fury that stems from the history of hegemony between the English and the Irish.

A MYTH ABOUT OUR IDENTITIES

In all of this tension between the Irish and the English, I started thinking about how offensive it would be for any white person in the United States, in any context, to use the sentence, “It’s like the problem we have with the blacks.” It absolutely wouldn’t fly in any context and would be deemed racist and offensive. It also got me to thinking about how most Christians I’ve talked to assume that our ethnicity doesn’t matter when it comes to developing an identity for our souls. In fact, it wasn’t too long ago when I would talk about my personal identity and say things like, “I honestly believe that God has created my soul to be completely unique and even if I wore different skin, I would still be Matthew Ryan Worthington. It doesn’t matter what I look like, what I smell like. God has created me to be this way, with this personality, this sense of humor, this intellectual capacity and nothing can change that.” I was someone who thought that what our bodies had outside of us didn’t matter for the most part; all that was of value was a person’s soul. After all, in the American evangelical community, there is a great deal of emphasis on matters of the soul—as some might put it, “We are in the soul-saving business.”

After more thought, I started wondering what it would be like if I was a woman or if I had darker skin. Because I think people would perceive me to be different, and that matters in someone’s development of an identity. What if I was Chinese-Cuban? What kinds of questions would I ask then? Or what if I was a woman and I had different biological issues to worry about? Perhaps I would have to ask myself how I’d deal with men who viewed me as a sexual utility. Maybe if I were black, seeing a Confederate flag would look different to me than it would to a majority of Americans, who may not even flinch when they see Boy Scouts carrying it in a southern state’s inauguration of a new governor.

I wondered all of this because when I arrived at that conference in London and saw a room full of white-looking people, save for the Sri-Lankan pastor and the Asian-English woman, I wouldn’t have guessed in a million years that any sort of cultural conflict might arise between any of the pasty-looking people in that room.

And I was wrong, about William mostly. I was wrong for not taking into account that who William is as an Irishman deeply affects him. It affects how he relates to people and it pulls at his heartstrings when people (especially the English) speak badly of the Irish because at some point, the English turned the Irish into “white people.” At one point in history, the Irish had their own language, culture, politics, tradition and religion, and all of that was interrupted when the English came in and told them that they weren’t good enough. It was interrupted when the English told the Irish that it was disgusting to speak Irish. And now, hundreds of years later, that Irishness, and all of the wounds that come with it, are still bleeding inside of William.

PAUL AND THE PARTS OF THE BODY

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the parts of the body, and ultimately comes to the conclusion that what matters the most is that we do not separate the parts of the body or try to make the body out of just one part. Instead, he urges us to value each and every part. He charges us to understand the intricate network of mutuality that binds all of us, and moreover he challenges us to understand how that network makes up all of

who we are as people and as individuals. In light of this, ask yourself this question: What does that look like for us today? In the United States, with so many different ethnicities making up our churches, and with so many different styles of worship? For me, being multi-ethnic (Anglo and Latino), this is a question I've had to ask myself in recent years. Perhaps 1 Corinthians 12 would read something like this for those of us in the Churches of Christ today:

For indeed, the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the Caucasian should say, "Because I am not black, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the Latino should say, "Because I am not Asian, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were Caucasian, where would the sense of soul and rhythm be? If the whole body were Latino, where would the sense of silence and a healthy diet be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The Baptist Church cannot say to the Catholic Church, "I don't need you!" And the Church of Christ cannot say to the Anglican Church, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Because what God is calling us to do today is to get past letting differences divide us within the Churches of Christ. We are actually apart of the larger American evangelical community, whether we realize it or not. Recently, Ron Sider compiled statistics to help evangelicals understand their patterns of behavior in comparison to the non-Christian community in the United States. In it, one of the most poignant statements that he makes is this: "Racism and perhaps physical abuse of wives seem to be worse in evangelical circles than elsewhere."¹ And this is among other issues like tithing, sexual immorality and rates of divorce—things that we are not good at either. While I concede that we have grace, we must also examine our patterns of behavior in an effort to eliminate them. And this is only in the United States. We can assume we are the worst, but the truth of the matter is we are only a part of the body. Because when one of our brothers who is English refers to another who is Irish as "a problem" based on the fact that his blood bleeds with Irish history, we can assume that there is still a problem—the problem that we haven't quite figured out what it is inside of the other person, what it is under different skin that makes Paul charge us to understand our necessity of mutuality with one another.

Make no mistake about this: we are all racist to some extent. I believe all of us are born innocent, and perhaps during childhood we remained in that beautiful innocence where we saw no divides between us and the kid next to us (aside from the fact that they may have had a better-looking toy than we did or maybe some form of "cooties"). During our adolescence we were injected with strange dispositions from our parents, our neighbors and perhaps most by our churches (for those who attended church) that heightened fears of people who looked different than us, sounded different than us and maybe even smelt different than us. Each sense grows a red flag that alerts us to someone who is potentially dangerous and we see them not as necessary to our body, but rather as a threat or as dangerous—maybe at best we are merely indifferent to them. So what will change this? What will soften our minds and our hearts to lay down our red flags? What will compel us to lay down our thoughtless sentiments about people of different backgrounds, sentiments that keep spilling racist offenses out of our mouths?

1. Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 28.

You know, the best thing about 1 Corinthians 12 is the next chapter: love. Immediately after this whole exposition about the body, Paul chooses to dialogue with the Corinthians about love. The realization about needing other people who vary from our skin color, our intellectual capacity, our income level, our neighborhood, our denomination . . . all of this is pointing in one direction, heading into the next chapter. Love. So as we sit in our pews on Sunday morning, or we are with our small groups, or we consider Jesus' charge for us to understand our neighbor, let us ask whether or not they all . . . look . . . like . . . us? And it's not about forcing yourself to be with these people, because that's not what Jesus did. When we analyze how we view the world, if we see ourselves as a part of a larger body than surely we will grow to love the rest of the parts because we know we need them. We will not have to force ourselves to care about the other parts.

So love. And love well. So that tomorrow, when our hurting world wakes up, we have a little bit more "kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6.10).

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